“No Man is an Island”

By John Donne

1624

John Donne (1572-1631) was an English poet whose time spent as a cleric in the Church of England often influenced the subjects of his poetry. In 1623, Donne suffered a nearly fatal illness, which inspired him to write a book of meditations on pain, health, and sickness called Devotions upon Emergent Occasions. “No Man is an Island” is a famous section of “Meditation XVII” from this book. As you read, draw connections between the modern version of “No Man is an Island” and the original olde English version of the poem.

Modern Version

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as any manner of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

Olde English Version

No man is an Iland, intire of i'tselfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a Cloed bee washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontorie were, as well as if a Manor of thy friends or of thine owne were; any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee.

1 Clod (noun): a piece of earth; a clump of soil
2 Promontory (noun): projecting point of land or of a bodily organ
Text-Based Questions:

Directions: Answer the following questions in complete sentences.

1. The island most likely represents which of the following? [RL.4]
   a. weakness
   b. isolation
   c. friendship
   d. anger

2. The continent most likely represents which of the following: [RL.4]
   a. commonality between all men and women
   b. strength in times of hardship
   c. a group of people suffering
   d. Europe

3. According to the poet, what is the one thing that all people will experience: [RL.6]
   a. happiness
   b. love
   c. individuality
   d. death

4. PART A: Write a sentence that expresses the theme of “No Man is an Island” [RL.2]

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5. PART B: What techniques does the poet use to develop the theme? [RL.1]

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6. What is the poet’s likely purpose for the final two lines of the poem? “And therefore never send to know for whom/ the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.” [RL.3]

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Discussion Questions:

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Donne clearly believes in the interconnectedness of humankind. In what ways does our modern society reflect this idea? Explain.

2. Today, do most people generally believe that one man’s death diminishes them? Why or why not? Explain.

3. How does the poet likely define friendship?

4. In the context of “No Man is an Island,” how do people face death?
Suggestions for Text Pairings:

“More Facebook Friends, Fewer Real Ones, Says Cornell Study” by Ned Potter (News)
In this ABC News article, students can learn about how a Cornell sociologist conducted a study suggesting that social networks may not be fulfilling our deeper social needs. Pair “No Man is an Island” with “More Facebook Friends, Fewer Real Ones, Says Cornell Study” and ask students to consider the ways Donne’s poem connects to our social media-dominated modern world. Are we more “involved in mankind” now, or less? Find “More Facebook Friends, Fewer Real Ones, Says Cornell Study” at CommonLit.org: Friendship & Loyalty → What is a friend? → 9th-10th Grade

http://commonlit.s3.amazonaws.com/texts/pdfs/000/000/170/original/More_Facebook_Friends_Fewer_Real_Ones.pdf?1426356903

“I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” by Emily Dickinson (Poem)
Dickinson, a well-known introvert, cherished isolation. In this poem, she calls public life “dreary” and takes pride in maintaining a private identity. Pair “No Man is an Island” with “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” and ask students to compare the poems’ themes. Which is greater: isolation or connectedness? Find “I’m Nobody! Who Are You?” at CommonLit.org: Identity → What makes you who you are? → 11th-12th Grade

http://commonlit.s3.amazonaws.com/texts/pdfs/000/000/150/original/Im_Nobody_Who_are_You.pdf?1434833977

“Death Be Not Proud” by John Donne (Poem)
Donne wrote “Death Be Not Proud” more than twenty years before writing “No Man is an Island.” Pair “No Man is an Island” with “Death Be Not Proud” and ask students to consider if and how Donne’s perspective toward death changed throughout his life. Find “Death Be Not Proud” at CommonLit.org: Death → How do people face death? → 9th-10th Grade

http://commonlit.s3.amazonaws.com/texts/pdfs/000/000/237/original/Death_Be_Not_Proud.pdf?1438033856

Answer Key for Text-Based Multiple-Choice Questions:

1. B
2. A
3. D